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NHS Manifesto: the missing piece of the puzzle

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The Lancet's NHS manifesto (1) is a broadly compelling one, and yet it mirrors an error made by NHS England's 5 Year Forward View (2) in calling for a major transformation of the UK's largest public service without acknowledging the importance of public engagement in those plans. To be sure, Crisp et al call for services to be made patient-centred and patients and carers are to be engaged "in decision making and care". But the overwhelming role outlined for the wider public and communities is as a provider of the informal care required to shrink NHS services.

The absence of an empowered public role in this manifesto is problematic because the continued "great national coming together" of the NHS depends upon public support. This must be nurtured through careful, genuine public engagement to build collective ownership of the future shape of the NHS. Instead Crisp et al present a ready-made blueprint for a future NHS, with transformation to be accelerated and improvement to be 'driven forward' by central Government "plan[ning] at scale" rather than one developed in partnership with the very public the NHS serves.

Even those who see public engagement as a luxury, or pandering to wrong-headed populism, should face the political realities of large-scale health system change in the UK. Where the public is dictated to and not meaningfully involved in decision-making, there will be noisy, time-consuming and expensive conflicts, and perhaps judicial review of NHS decisions. If there is a case for change, make it. But seek to progress health system transformation with, and not in spite of, the wider public.

1. Crisp N, Stuckler D, Horton R, Adebawale V, Bailey S, Baker M, et al. Manifesto for a healthy and health-creating society. *The Lancet*. 2016 Oct 7th.
2. NHS England. Five Year Forward View. Leeds: NHS England; 2014. Available from: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/5yfv-web.pdf>

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